

A LITERARY CONTROVERSY IN EIGHTEENTH
CENTURY FRANCE: VOLTAIRE vs.
DESFONTAINES

THEODORE BESTERMAN, Director of the *Institut et Musée Voltaire* in Geneva, is the process of publishing *Voltaire's Correspondence*,¹ an undertaking which represents the most important single contribution to Voltaire studies made in many years. Besterman's edition, which to this date contains only the letters from the beginning of Voltaire's career as a correspondent (1704) up to 1748, and which has reached volume sixteen, contains many new items of importance hitherto unpublished or published in isolated articles. In many cases these items throw new light on the early career of Voltaire, clearing up problems which have been insoluble, or reestablishing a more accurate picture of events which had inevitably become distorted because of unreliable or insufficient data.

An excellent example of the latter situation is offered in the case of the controversy between Voltaire and the Abbé Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines (1685-1745).² There has been no recent attempt to restudy this controversy with the aid of Besterman's edition. It is my purpose in this paper to do just that with the hope of shedding new light on the characters of the two men involved, and, in an incidental way, to attempt to recapture some of the literary atmosphere in France in the twenty-year period from 1724 to 1743.

Desfontaines' first encounter with the already famous Voltaire came about in 1724 in a way which is interesting for students of this period of French literature, for it throws light on the rather questionable code of ethics observed by writers of that time. The laws of copyright were still rather primitive, and although an author was granted a royal

privilège to publish his book in France which protected him up to a point, he was helpless if his manuscript fell into the hands of some unscrupulous publisher, or some other ambitious person who did not hesitate to have the work published clandestinely in France or more often in Holland or Switzerland.³ This very thing happened to Voltaire. In some mysterious way, the manuscript of his epic poem *La Ligue* fell into the hands of Desfontaines, who proceeded to have it published anonymously in Holland. Voltaire of course was enraged at this, the more so because, as so often happened, this unauthorized edition was filled with inaccuracies. Besides these inaccuracies, Voltaire, much to his chagrin, found several lines inserted by the editor, and among them two in which a highly unfavorable opinion was expressed concerning the literary merits of those respected French poets, Pradon, Perrault and La Motte. These lines were of course attributed to Voltaire by the public, and were the cause of much embarrassment for him, not only at that moment, but for many years to come (Besterman, 195 and 197).

The success with which Desfontaines managed to keep his part in this publication secret is evidenced in a letter written a month later that same year. Voltaire had been approached by the Duc de Richelieu to recommend a man to serve as secretary to the latter's embassy. Voltaire at first recommended his friend Thieriot, who turned down the position. Other applicants for the job included Desfontaines, but he was considered unsuitable by Voltaire. However, Desfontaines did suggest Davou, whose nobility of character he vouched for, and whose candidacy Voltaire seconded (Besterman, 213). This is the first mention of Desfontaines' name in Voltaire's correspondence, and the tone of the reference reveals that Voltaire held him in fairly high esteem, respected his judgment of others, and had no inkling as yet

that Desfontaines was responsible for the falsified edition of *La Ligue*.

Early the next year, in May 1725, Voltaire became involved in a lawsuit instigated against Desfontaines in which the latter was accused of highly improper moral behavior, and because of which Desfontaines was imprisoned in Bicêtre. Voltaire was approached by friends of Desfontaines to use his influence in obtaining the latter's freedom. At that time Voltaire was a non-paying guest at the estate of M. and Mme de Bernières (Besterman, 232) and despite his ill health immediately travelled to Versailles and aided in obtaining the liberty of the accused. The de Bernières family was distantly related to Desfontaines and in later years, when this whole matter was rehashed by Desfontaines and Voltaire, Desfontaines made the claim in *La Voltairomanie* (1738) that Voltaire acted on his behalf not out of any sense of human kindness, but rather because he was requested to do so by M. de Bernières, who resented Voltaire's presence in the household and who demanded this service in payment. Voltaire, of course, denied this, and his word has been accepted as true by all commentators. Besterman, however, has come across a letter from Voltaire to Thieriot written on June 27, 1725, from which it is evident that indeed Voltaire was a non-paying guest. Besterman adds the comment that this letter proves beyond a doubt the validity of Desfontaines' charge.⁴

In any case, thanks in part to Voltaire, Desfontaines found himself a free man, but he was not yet entirely satisfied. On May 31, he wrote his first letter to Voltaire in which he expressed at great length his deep appreciation for all that Voltaire had done for him. But it distressed him to think that there remained the slightest suspicion of his guilt as there must have remained since he was exiled from

the capital. In language which seems scarcely proper in a letter of appreciation, he strongly urges Voltaire to serve him further by having his order to leave Paris rescinded (Besterman, 227). Voltaire, however, was not annoyed by this additional request for aid, and we have evidence that he considered his intervention responsible for the complete pardon of Desfontaines (Besterman, 229).

In his letter of thanks to Voltaire, Desfontaines makes a remark that can be interpreted as perhaps a classic example of a "double entendre." He says, "J'ai un plan d'apologie qui sera beau et curieux, et que je travaillerai à la campagne." This statement is on the surface quite innocuous, but in the light of events which were soon to follow, it takes on the appearance of the most inexcusable expression of ingratitude. For within less than a year, there appeared in print a bitter pamphlet directed against Voltaire entitled *Apologie de M. de Voltaire* which was attributed to Desfontaines despite his vociferous denial of its authorship.⁵ As a result of this satirical *Apologie*, Voltaire completely reversed his position with regard to the innocence of Desfontaines on the morals charge. Undoubtedly, Desfontaines acted in a most ungentlemanly way and deserved the wrath of Voltaire. Yet his action in writing the *Apologie* ought not to have called down on his head the much repeated accusations of moral turpitude. Voltaire resorted to the unethical device of slander, in the hope, no doubt, that the charge brought against Desfontaines in 1725 would be renewed with more salutary effects!

During the years of his exile in England, 1726-29, Voltaire seems to have put the Desfontaines affair more or less out of his mind. There are few references in his letters to Desfontaines, and these make no reference to the *Apologie*. In June 1728, for instance, in a letter to Thieriot, he refers

to a translation by Desfontaines of his English essay on epic poetry. This letter is written in English, and it is interesting to hear Voltaire express himself in this language.

"I have received, by an unknown hand, my English essays translation. I suppose it came from you, and I thank you for it. It is but a slight performance in English, but it is a ridiculous one in French. For the articles relating to Milton, to Sir John Denham, Waller, Dryden, must needs be altogether out of the way of a French reader. Besides abbot Desfontaines has been very far from doing one justice in many passages. He has mistaken the West-Indies for the East-Indies. He has translated the cakes, which young Ascanius takes notice of being eaten by his countrymen, for 'la faim dévorante de Cacus.' So he mistakes 'des assiettes et de la croûte de pâte' for a geant and a Monster. I have not the book by me at present, and cannot remember all his oversights. But sure I am this little pamphlet did not at all deserve the trouble he has been at of putting it in the french language. . ." (Besterman 327).

This unfortunate mistranslation of the word *cakes* by Desfontaines was for years the source of much hilarity on Voltaire's part. He never allowed Desfontaines to forget it and later used it as evidence that Desfontaines was incompetent in English. This despite the fact that Desfontaines' translation of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1727) and the later translation of Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1744) were resounding successes.⁶

The years 1730-1734 were relatively quiet ones in the Voltaire-Desfontaines quarrel. Indeed, Voltaire had very little reason to become angry at Desfontaines during these years.⁷ In collaboration with the Abbé Granet, Desfontaines had begun to publish the first of his three literary journals, the *Nouvelliste du Parnasse*, on which he worked from December 18, 1730 to April 1732. In its pages, Desfontaines does not make more than a dozen references to Voltaire. There is only one letter in the total of fifty-two which is

devoted entirely to a work by Voltaire (letter IV, Vol. I, 50-67); in all other cases, Voltaire's name is mentioned only in passing, and almost invariably the reference is flattering.⁸

Letter IV, written in 1731, is devoted to a study of Voltaire's tragedy *Brutus*, which had been produced in December 1730. Surprisingly enough, Desfontaines does not consider the lack of popularity of this tragedy a sign of its mediocrity. Indeed, he concludes that despite the weakness in characterization its true beauties can be appreciated only through a close reading of the text. He explains that the simplicity and complete logic of the plot did not appeal to an audience becoming accustomed more and more to violent situations, spectacle and complication of action, and having lost the sensitive ear of the seventeenth century audience.

To illustrate the tone of impartiality to be found in this journal, one has only to read the flattering remarks Desfontaines makes (Vol. I, 256-259) concerning Voltaire's *La Henriade*, a new edition of which had just come off the press. "Quelque chose qu'on dise, on lit ce Poème avec plaisir, presque toujours avec admiration; on le relit, on en retient les vers, on les cite." After comparing *La Henriade* to Tasso's *Orlando Furioso*, Ercilla's *La Araucana* and Camoens' *Os Lucíadas*, he concludes that it is "le premier et seul Poème digne de louange que la France ait produit jusqu'ici."⁹

The references to Desfontaines in Voltaire's correspondence during the years 1730-1735 are very few in number. In works other than his correspondence, Voltaire makes a few passing remarks about Desfontaines. An example can be seen in the ten lines he inserted, about 1734, into a light burlesque poem entitled *L'Anti-Giton* which had been originally written in 1714. Briefly, Voltaire says that Cupid, who reigns over Paris, is in no way like that brutish abbé

absorbed in vice, tormenting his fellows, corrupting youth; a man whose hideous appearance causes tender love to quiver; who is like a demon that violates angels, and so on. Such lines as these become increasingly common in Voltaire's works, and we shall have occasion to mention later more violent ones.

On September 16, 1735, Desfontaines published¹⁰ in his second journal, *Observations sur les Ecrits Modernes* (begun in 1735), a criticism of Voltaire's tragedy *La Mort de César* which had been produced the previous month at the collège d'Harcourt and which had just been published in an unauthorized edition. The tone of this article is distinctly different from that of his earlier account of *Brutus*. In it he criticizes Voltaire for treating a theme which could be extremely dangerous in a monarchy such as that of France, namely the assassination of a king by a band of rabid republicans. He rejects Voltaire's claim that this tragedy was written primarily to give the French nation a taste of English-style tragedy, for Voltaire claimed that he drew much of his inspiration from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Even if this is so, says Desfontaines, the tragedy is none the less dangerous.

Besides this criticism of the political undertones of the tragedy, Desfontaines criticizes it for other more literary shortcomings, particularly the weakness and lack of "vraisemblance" in the characters. He objects to the fact that the plotters against Caesar all address Caesar with the familiar "tu" form of address, an incredible procedure since they were mere citizens ("particuliers") in the republic; he objects to the monstrous rather than heroic nature of Brutus (whom Voltaire portrayed as Caesar's son), and Desfontaines calls him more of a Quaker than a Stoic. Caesar himself is a weak character possessing none of the grandeur history

attributes to his character. The last scene of the tragedy is superfluous, being in the form of a funeral oration and controversy between Brutus, who attempts to justify himself in the eyes of the people, and Antony, who incites them to vengeance. Finally, Desfontaines questions whether this play can rightly be called a tragedy, and, after saying that there are some striking lines in it, he quickly adds the exclamation, "Mais qu'il y en a de faibles et de durs! Que d'expressions vicieuses, que de mauvaises rimes!"

Voltaire must have anticipated this unfavorable attitude on the part of Desfontaines to his tragedy, for on September 7 of that year he addressed a letter from Cirey (where he was living with his mistress, Mme du Chatelet), in which he very politely requested Desfontaines to insert a note in the *Observations* to the effect that the recent edition of *La Mort de César* was unauthorized and that consequently he should not be held responsible for the errors to be found therein (Besterman, 880, 888). This request, however, reached Desfontaines in all probability after his article had gone to the printer, and consequently the best Desfontaines could do was to print the letter immediately following his article.

When, early in October, Desfontaines' article came off the press and Voltaire read it and the accompanying publication of his letter, he went into a paroxysm of rage. From October 4, we have four letters (Besterman 891, 892, 893, 894) written by Voltaire, one to Thieriot, one to the abbé Asselin, the *proviseur* of the collège d'Harcourt, one to the abbé D'Olivet, the director of the *Académie Française*, and one to Berger. In each of these letters Voltaire refers to the betrayal on the part of Desfontaines, accusing him of maliciously printing the letter with its rubric of Cirey (Voltaire at this time wished to keep his presence at Cirey a

secret) (Besterman 893) and of having deliberately ignored the information supplied him concerning the falsified version of the tragedy.

In the letter to Thieriot and in that to Berger, Voltaire went into a detailed rebuttal of Desfontaines' criticisms of his tragedy. His anger was caused by mainly two things: Desfontaines' unauthorized publishing of Voltaire's letter with the resulting revelation of Voltaire's whereabouts, and Desfontaines' slightly sarcastic criticisms of Voltaire's competence as an interpreter of the Quaker religion (Besterman 926) and of Roman history.

Voltaire's indignant outbursts did not of course stop on October 4. For weeks thereafter, his letters are peppered with allusions to it and with unflattering remarks about Desfontaines' character.¹¹ But perhaps the most inexcusable remark made at this time by Voltaire was in a letter to his friend de Cideville, written on September 20, four days after the publication of Desfontaines' article, in which he says:

"Je me repens bien de l'avoir tiré de Bissetre et de luy avoir sauvé la Grève. Il vaut mieux après tout brûler un prêtre que d'ennuyer le public. 'Oportet aliquem mori pro pupalo [sic].' Si je l'avois laissé cuire, j'aurois épargné au public bien des sottises." (Besterman 885)

In the November 5 issue of the *Observations*, Desfontaines published a lengthy anonymous letter in defense of Voltaire's tragedy and against the charge that Brutus was more a Quaker than a Stoic. The author of the letter is not identified by Besterman, but from its general tone, and its resemblances to the earlier letters to Thieriot and Berger, one might with some degree of certainty attribute it to Voltaire. It is a clever defense of the role of Brutus who, according to the author, emerges as the real hero of the

tragedy since he successfully resolves his inner conflict between filial duty and political duty.¹² The letter ends with the concession that perhaps the last scene is superfluous, but that it can be excused by the fact that this tragedy was after all an experiment in so far as it was patterned after the English taste. The argumentation in this letter was so persuasive that Desfontaines was convinced and he followed the letter with an abject apology for having misled the public into believing that the editor's errors were made by Voltaire.¹³

Voltaire, of course, was delighted with this retraction, and he immediately sent off a letter to Desfontaines which is a masterpiece of mockery (Besterman 909).

“Si l'amitié vous a dicté, monsieur, ce que j'ai lu dans la feuille trente-quatrième que vous m'avez envoyée, mon coeur en est bien plus touché que mon amour propre n'avait été blessé des feuilles précédentes. Je ne me plaignais pas de vous comme d'un critique, mais comme d'un ami; car mes ouvrages méritent beaucoup de censure; mais moi, je ne méritais pas la perte de votre amitié.”

He then proceeds to inform Desfontaines how the article in the *Observations* should have been written. He points out at length to Desfontaines that he would have rendered a service to literature if, instead of speaking briefly of this tragedy as though it were an ordinary play, he had seized the occasion to examine the English, and even the Italian theatre, of which it could give some idea.¹⁴ He continues by contrasting the French tragic stage and its taste for long amorous conversations, with the English stage and its greater emphasis on action and “de grands intérêts.” Voltaire adds this surprising confession: “Je suis revenu à vous de bonne foi, et mon coeur, sans fiel et sans rancune, se livre au plaisir de vous servir autant qu'à l'amour de la vérité.” The letter ends with the startling request that Desfontaines send

him his criticisms of his works, and the sentence: "Faites votre pénitence (i.e. send me your criticisms) avec le zèle d'un homme bien converti, et songez que je mérite par mes sentiments, par ma franchise, par la vérité et la tendresse, qui sont dans mon coeur, que vous voulez goûter avec moi les douceurs de l'amitié et celles de la littérature."

It was, of course, with his tongue in his cheek that Voltaire penned those rather sugary sentences, for in the November edition of the *Mercure de France* there was published an authentic version of the last scene of *La Mort de César* followed by this sarcastic remark among others: "Il est encore plus étonnant que les Auteurs des *Observations* aient voulu juger de la *Henriade*. Leurs critiques sont faites avec bien peu de goût." (Besterman IV, 177). Now, the question arises: was this comment written by Voltaire, or even sanctioned by him, or was it entirely the work of La Rogue, the editor of the *Mercure*? Desfontaines, of course, did not hesitate a moment to attribute it to Voltaire's influence over La Rogue. Early in December, he wrote to Voltaire a most violent expression of disapproval, in which he warned Voltaire that any further public attacks upon him would lead to an open battle and Voltaire's ignominious defeat (Besterman 926).

In a letter dated about two weeks later, December 17, (Besterman 936) Desfontaines, in a much quieter tone, defends his criticisms of *La Henriade*, repeating that the note in the *Mercure* was highly unjust. He points out to Voltaire that whenever he has had occasion to mention the epic, it has always been in a tone of praise, which was partially true, as we have seen from his article in the *Nouvelliste*. He goes on to say that whenever he has had to criticize anything in Voltaire's publications, he has always done so in

a friendly way, and if Voltaire has ever been offended by such criticism, Desfontaines has always retracted his words.

The following year, 1736, found Desfontaines involved in a lawsuit instigated by the *Académie Française*. An anonymous and blunt criticism of the *Académie* had been published early in 1736, and Desfontaines was quite unjustly¹⁵ accused of having written it. Voltaire was, of course, amused at this unexpected turn of events, and was slightly at a loss as to which side of the argument to support, for at this time he was irritated with the *Académie* for refusing to consider him as a candidate for membership. We find him, therefore, asking Thieriot on January 25, 1736: "Est-il vrai que Desfontaines est puni de ses crimes pour avoir fait une bonne action? On dit qu'on va le condamner aux galères pour avoir tourné l'*Académie Française* en ridicule, après qu'il a impunément outragé tant de bons auteurs, et trahi ses amis." (Besterman 962)

The year 1736 is notable in the Voltaire-Desfontaines controversy, for in that year Desfontaines succeeded in winning a victory over his opponent, while at the same time coming to taste again the acid wit of the latter. Early in that year, on January 27, Voltaire's tragedy *Alzire* was produced and Desfontaines was obliged to make some reference to it in his *Observations*. His remarks are brief, and on first reading them, the reader is deceived into believing them to be quite flattering. They read, in part, as follows:

"J'aurai soin de vous rendre compte de cette pièce au premier jour et je ferai mes efforts pour en parler dignement. Je serai le panégyriste de cet illustre écrivain lorsque je croirai qu'il le mérite, c'est-à-dire, que je le serai presque toujours. Pourrais-je avoir jamais la pensée de ternir la gloire d'un auteur qui contribue en son genre à celle de ce règne? On me mande que les principales beautés de cette tragédie consistent dans des situations admirables, dans des

surprises bien ménagées, dans des peintures du plus parfait et du plus haut coloris et dans la noblesse des caractères bien soutenus, surtout de ceux d'Alvarez et de Zamore. On ajoute que le cinquième acte est audessus de tout." (IV, 141)

To anyone familiar with the events at the end of 1735 and with Desfontaines' customary frankness in his articles of literary criticism, the sarcasm of this report of *Alzire* is evident. The expression "je ferai mes efforts pour en parler dignement" should not be construed as meaning that the critic feels unworthy of discussing so sublime a tragedy, but quite the contrary, that to speak of it in a fashion worthy of Desfontaines, a decided effort would be required. Similarly, the rather off-handed way in which he merely reports what others have said of the tragedy implies that he himself holds quite different views on the matter. And it is of interest to note that Desfontaines never found the opportunity to come back to this tragedy, implying, of course, that it was unworthy of a detailed criticism.

Voltaire soon saw through the thin veil of flattery and in his preface¹⁶ to the published edition of *Alzire* he makes some rather disparaging remarks about professional literary critics. Among others is this rather debatable observation: "Il est sûr qu'un homme qui n'est attaqué que dans ses écrits ne doit jamais répondre aux critiques, car si elles sont bonnes, il n'a autre chose à faire qu'à se corriger; et si elles sont mauvaises, elles meurent en naissant." He goes on to make the slightly hypocritical remark: "On sait que ceux qui n'ont pas assez d'esprit pour attaquer nos ouvrages calomnient nos personnes; quelque honteux qu'il soit de leur répondre, il le serait quelquefois davantage de ne leur répondre pas." There is also a direct reference to Desfontaines: "On demandait, il n'y a pas longtemps, à un homme qui avait fait je ne sais quelle mauvaise brochure contre son

ami et son bienfaiteur, pourquoi il s'est emporté à cet excès d'ingratitude. Il répondit froidement: 'Il faut que je vive!'

Yet it seems probable that at first Voltaire was not aware of the subtly sarcastic tone of Desfontaines' report on *Alzire*. Just previously he had composed his famous *Ode Sur l'Ingratitude* in which he wrote some of his most vitriolic lines against Desfontaines,¹⁷ calling the latter by such names as a monster more hideous than a snake, a sodomist, an ingrate, a frog which croaks from the slime of the gutter against his benefactor, the trumpet of calumny, and so on. Strangely enough these verses were deleted from the poem after Desfontaines published his noncommittal article on *Alzire*, only to be reinserted when Voltaire came to realize that Desfontaines' failure to publish his own opinion of the tragedy amounted to a condemnation of it. Voltaire gave as his reason for restoring the original lines that without them the unity of the ode was destroyed and the continuity of the thought broken!¹⁸

Desfontaines makes no mention of this *Ode* in his *Observations*,¹⁹ but it is evident from the increasingly sarcastic tone of his articles that he was well aware of its existence. Witness for example his remarks on Voltaire's next dramatic production, *L'Enfant Prodigue*, which Voltaire had produced anonymously:

"J'ai vu les sentiments partagés au sujet de l'auteur inconnu de la comédie dont il s'agit. Pour moi, je ne me suis pas mépris un instant, et, sans prétendre ainsi dévoiler le mystère, je dirai seulement que le grand poète peut quelquefois se dégrader, en offrant du bas et du trivial; qu'il peut mettre sur la scène des rôles insipides qu'il a crus de bon goût dans son cabinet, de débiter de froides plaisanteries qui ont ri à son imagination échauffée." (VI, 312)

Despite this condemnation Desfontaines did not begrudge words of praise when they were due. He goes on to say:

"Mais au milieu de toutes les défauts qui frappent les connaisseurs, le génie distingué et rare perce. On reconnaît en général la singularité du talent de l'auteur caché, à la légèreté du style, à l'enjouement du dialogue, à la finesse de quelques traits, à l'élégance caractéristique de plusieurs vers frappés de main de maître." In a later article, Desfontaines returned to this comedy, and explicitly attributed it to Voltaire. This later article is distinguished for the following amusing simile, which Voltaire probably did not enjoy: "On dit que l'autruche, pressée par les chasseurs, cache sa tête derrière un arbre, et que parce qu'elle ne voit pas, elle s'imagine n'être pas vue. L'auteur de *L'Enfant Prodigue*, qu'on est bien loin de vouloir rabaisser par cette comparaison, fait à peu près la même chose. . . ." (XI, 289)

In August 1738, Desfontaines published his most violent attack on Voltaire, up to this time, in his very acid review of the definitive version of the *Elements de la Philosophie de Newton*. The paragraph that most infuriated Voltaire reads as follows:

"Il serait ridicule, ce me semble, qu'un philosophe renonçât à la philosophie dans un âge un peu avancé, afin de s'adonner à la poésie; mais il sied, au contraire, à un poète de renoncer aux vers à cet âge pour devenir philosophe. *Turpe senex vates*. Je ne suis donc pas de ceux qui trouvent mauvais que M. de Voltaire se soit à la fin dégoûté d'emprisonner ses pensées et de mesurer des mots, et qu'il ait voulu donner un noble essor à son esprit, en l'élevant aux sublimes objets de la philosophie." (XV, 49)

Desfontaines later questions whether Voltaire is properly endowed by nature to treat competently of physics and philosophy. He grants that Voltaire has poetic talent, "Mais la nature est-elle si prodigue de ses dons, et n'y a-t-il pas quelque incompatibilité entre le génie des vers et le génie de la philosophie." (XV, 73) What follows is perhaps the

most insulting remark he could have written:

“Les premiers progrès qu’on fait dans quelque science ont coutume de flatter l’amour-propre. On travaille avec ardeur, on lit avec assiduité, on écrit pour soi-même et on conclut aisément que ce qu’on écrit pour s’instruire peut servir à instruire les autres. Tels sont, selon les apparences, les motifs qui ont porté M. de Voltaire à écrire sur le Newtonianisme, et à publier ensuite ce qu’il a écrit. (*Ibid.*)

Now an interesting question arises concerning the reason for this bitter tone in Desfontaines’ article. This article was published almost two years after the skirmish involving *Alzire* and the *Ode sur l’Ingratitude*. During 1737 and most of 1738, Voltaire had more or less forgotten Desfontaines because of his intense preoccupation with Newton, and at first sight Desfontaines’ sudden attack seems unjustifiable. But the reason is obvious if one remembers that in about June 1738 Voltaire composed a comedy which was neither produced nor published during his lifetime, entitled *L’Envieux*, in which the main character happens to be an ambitious, unscrupulous pamphleteer named Zoilin, who obviously represents Desfontaines, the critic of the modern Homer, Voltaire. This comedy, which contains some delightfully satirical lines against Desfontaines, as well as some amusing ones in which Voltaire describes himself, was deplored by Mme du Chatelet, who prevented Voltaire from having it published, although it undoubtedly was freely transmitted in manuscript form since we have evidence that Voltaire sent it to Lamarre, who was instructed to do with it as he wished (Besterman 1470). Besides this comedy, Voltaire had circulated, about this same time, another of his inimitably vulgar epigrams in which Desfontaines is pictured in the vilest light possible.²⁰

In the light of these two satirical works by Voltaire, the attitude of Desfontaines in his review of the *Elements* is

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easily explained and indeed justified. What is not so easily justified is the publication in November of 1738 of a pamphlet written but not signed by Voltaire, entitled *Le Pré-servatif*. In this pamphlet, Voltaire completely rehashes the whole affair of 1725, and reiterates many of the objections he has made in private and in public to criticisms of his works by Desfontaines. Voltaire turned over the manuscript of this diatribe to the Chevalier de Mouhy with the instructions to publish it if he so desired, but on the condition that the latter use his own name as the author.²¹ De Mouhy, as befitted a man of his rather questionable code of ethics, jumped at the opportunity.

Ostensibly, *Le Pré-servatif* was written with the purpose of enlightening the people about the character of journalists who try to deceive them. Unfortunately, it is said, too many contemporary journals do not live up to the high character of their progenitor the *Journal des Savants*. Desfontaines' two journals are cited as illustrations. In them one fails to find the same taste, the same knowledge, the same equity as in the *Journal des Savants*. The author next proceeds to enumerate some twenty-nine blunders to be found in the *Observations*. It is unnecessary here to enter into a detailed consideration of each of these so-called blunders. Suffice it to summarize them briefly as follows: of the twenty-nine items, thirteen point out specific examples of Desfontaines' questionable literary taste, six point out his incompetence in matters dealing with physics, three criticize his ignorance of history, two his ignorance of Latin, two his pugnacious character, one his role as a vilifier of contemporary literature, one his poor taste in musical matters, and one his ignorance of the Italian and English nations. The pamphlet closes with the reflexion that the nature of the itemized blunders made by Desfontaines is such that it should serve

as a warning to the public to ignore him. In all fairness to Voltaire, it must be admitted that despite the pettiness of some of his remarks, especially in item 27 where he retells the whole story of 1725, there are relatively few remarks of a personal nature in this pamphlet. Although the general tone is sarcastic and disdainful, yet he attacks Desfontaines on legitimate grounds, namely on his shortcomings as a critic, a scholar, and a scientist. From this point of view, then, Voltaire showed commendable self-restraint, and may it be said here that Voltaire rarely, if ever, debased himself by writing for publication criticisms that equaled in obscenity some of the remarks made in passing in his personal correspondence, or in some occasional verses he jotted down for his own amusement or for that of his friends.

Desfontaines was, of course, outraged by this pamphlet and immediately set about to compose the retort that he had promised Voltaire should the latter insult him again in public. One of the things that most enraged Desfontaines was the frontispiece that appeared in the edition of *Le Préservatif*. In this frontispiece, Desfontaines is depicted as receiving a lashing in the presence of Venus, who is directing the punishment for Desfontaines' alleged crimes against her code of love.

Desfontaines' retort lived up to the threat that he had made to Voltaire and is perhaps the most violent attack ever directed against Voltaire in his long career. It is entitled *La Voltairomanie*,²² and is the work of a desperate man who has no recourse but to turn to recriminations which lose all effect from the childish and petulant way in which they are made. Had Desfontaines retained even the semblance of dignity, his attack might have been more impressive. But as it is, the reader is repelled by the degree of degradation to which Desfontaines has fallen.

The pamphlet supposedly is written by some unnamed lawyer who wishes to clear the name of Desfontaines, and to reveal to the public the true character of Voltaire. He proceeds to take up each criticism that appeared in *Le Préservatif* and to refute the arguments advanced by Voltaire. But this refutation loses all effectiveness from the manner in which it is made. Voltaire is described as being completely ignorant of the theatre, his epic poem *La Henriade* is called "un chaos éblouissant, un mauvais tissu de fictions usées ou déplacées, où il y a autant de prose que de vers et plus de fautes contre la langue que de pages;" his *Temple du Goût* is described as "la production d'une petite tête ivre d'orgueil;" his *Charles XII* is "l'ouvrage d'un ignorant étourdi, écrit dans le goût badin d'une caillette bourgeoise que brode des aventures;" and of the *Eléments de la Philosophie de Newton* it is asked "seront-ils jamais autre chose que l'ébauche d'un écolier qui bronche à chaque pas, et qu'un livre ridicule?" Voltaire himself is described as "un homme déshonoré dans la société civile par ses lâches impostures, par ses fourberies, par ses honteuses bassesses, par ses vols publics et particuliers et par sa superbe impertinence qui lui a attiré jusqu'ici de si flétrissantes disgrâces." Voltaire, of course, went into another paroxysm of rage when he read the pamphlet, and was determined this time to have Desfontaines arrested. His correspondence at the end of 1738 and the beginning of 1739 is filled with references to *La Voltairomanie* and requests to friends to denounce Desfontaines to the authorities.

For the next few months, both Desfontaines and Voltaire tried to have each other imprisoned. Desfontaines based his denunciation on the charge that Voltaire was defying the royal order that he cease publishing anti-royal and anti-religious propaganda. When Desfontaines realized that he

could not succeed in this, he offered to make peace with Voltaire by promising a public disavowal of the *Voltairemanie* if Voltaire would promise to do the same for *Le Prémervatif*. Voltaire of course refused (Besterman 1870). Desfontaines, however, did publish a disavowal and it has been suggested that it was in all probability because of pressure put on him by Mme du Chatelet.²³

Desfontaines continued to publish his *Observations* until 1743, when he was again involved in a skirmish with the *Académie Française*, which resulted in the withdrawal of his *privilège* on October 6. In the final four years of the *Observations*, the references to Voltaire became less direct and less personal. The last serious attempt to ridicule Voltaire is to be seen in Desfontaines' review (1739) of Voltaire's *Dissertation sur le Feu* which had failed to win the award offered by the *Académie des Sciences*. Before discussing Voltaire's essay, however, Desfontaines first gives a highly flattering account of the essay submitted by Mme du Chatelet. He then compares Voltaire's essay with the one written by his mistress, and concludes that the latter is vastly superior to the former. In this way he probably hoped to shame Voltaire and to turn the latter's jealous nature and pride against his mistress.

Desfontaines' career was about over. He was, however, allowed to found a new journal called *Jugements sur les Ouvrages Nouveaux*, which soon came to an end owing to his death in December 1745.

In 1774, Elie Fréron, who replaced Desfontaines as the principal critic of Voltaire, recalled some advice given him by Desfontaines many years previously:

"Voltaire vous recherchera; si vous cédez au désir qu'il aura de vous compter au nombre de ses partisans, vous ne tarderez pas à vous en repentir; vous éprouverez qu'il n'est

pas possible d'être longtemps l'ami d'un homme qui n'a que de l'amour-propre, et un amour-propre effréné. Il vous obsédera pour que vous parliez de lui sans cesse en bien, en mal de tous les autres écrivains. Il voudra que vous mettiez votre nom à des préfaces, ou plutôt des panégyriques en son honneur, qu'il aura composés lui-même pour quelque nouvelle édition de ses oeuvres; il exigera que vous insériez dans vos feuilles des critiques sanglantes, des satires amères de sa façon contre les auteurs les plus distingués. A la fin, vous perdrez patience, et vous serez obligé de rompre avec lui. Je viens de vous conter en deux mots ma propre histoire, c'est-à-dire de ma liaison avec cet homme célèbre."²⁴

The conclusions which may be drawn from this review of the Voltaire-Desfontaines controversy are obvious ones. The relative degree of guilt on the part of each protagonist is difficult to determine, but with the aid of new information supplied by Besterman, it is now possible to increase Voltaire's portion, for invariably he made the first move in each of the outbursts of hostilities. His sensitivity and pride made it impossible for him to suffer criticism with equanimity since he always interpreted criticism of his literary productions as personal affronts. He was, therefore, rarely able to reply to his critics with restraint and too often took his revenge in the form of obscene epigrams. In 1744, shortly before Desfontaines' death, Voltaire wrote an article entitled *Conseils à un Journaliste* in which he set down what he considered to be the ideal code of ethics to be observed by all professional critics. It is unfortunate that he himself did not always act in accord with this code in his replies to his critics.

Desfontaines strikes one as a fundamentally sincere man with a distinct streak of stubbornness and jealousy in his nature. His early career as a man of letters reveals a certain disregard for ethical behavior, but after 1730, he impresses one as being admirably reserved in his relationship with

Voltaire, until in 1738 the latter's actions forced him to lose all self control and to blemish forever what reputation he might have had as a critic.

ROBERT L. MYERS

NOTES

1. Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire's Correspondence*, Geneva, 1953. All future references to this work will be given under the editor's last name, followed by the number assigned by him to the letter of Voltaire in question.
2. For a brief biographical sketch of Desfontaines, see Lucien Foulet, *La Correspondance de Voltaire*, (Paris, Hachette), 1913, 242 ff.
3. François Cornou, *Trente Années de Luites contre Voltaire et les Philosophes du XVIII^e siècle: Elie Fréron (1718-1776)*, (Paris, Champion), 1922, p. 46-47.
4. In 1725, Voltaire, still had a high opinion of Desfontaines and considered him innocent of the charge of sodomy. See Besterman 226.
5. See Foulet, *loc. cit.* Thieriot named Desfontaines as the author of the *Apologie* in a letter to Voltaire, August 16, 1726. See Besterman 292. For a description of the contents of the *Apologie*, see Foulet, *loc. cit.*
6. Foulet, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-254. For additional references to Desfontaines in Voltaire's correspondence from England, see Besterman 324, 325, and Foulet, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-146, 154-155, 186.
7. For Desfontaines' activities and publications between 1725-1730, see Charles Nisard, *Les Ennemis de Voltaire* (Paris, August) 1853, p. 37 ff. Desfontaines' interest in literary questions is evident from his *Dictionnaire Néologique*, 1726 (for date see his *Nouvelliste du Parnasse* I, 510) which he believed served a purpose similar to that of *Les Précieuses Ridicules* of Molière in the preceding century.
8. Desfontaines, *Le Nouvelliste du Parnasse*, Paris, 1734, Vol. I: pp. 50-67; 113; 115; 256-259; 519-535. Vol. II: 56; 61; 444-445; 513.
9. In the *Nouvelliste*, I could find only one unflattering statement concerning Voltaire (I, 519-35). Desfontaines suggests that Voltaire's self depreciation in his "Sentiments d'un spectateur François sur la nouvelle Tragédie d'Inès de Castro" smacks of insincerity: "Peut-on croire que celui qui se rend si peu de justice, en s'abaissant, la rende aux autres, en les louant? Cela est, je crois, sur le même ton." See also Besterman 404. The latter makes an unfounded reference in the remark: "The Nou-

celliste was ostensibly friendly to Voltaire, but with an undercurrent of hostility." (II, p. 202) Additional flattering remarks by Desfontaines are the following: letter XXIX concerning the English Essay by Voltaire on the Civil Wars of France; II, 445 in which he praises the *Histoire de Charles XII*.

10. Desfontaines, *Observations sur les Ecrits Modernes*, Paris, 1735-1743, Vol. II, pp. 270 ff.
11. See, for example, Besterman: 897, 903, 906, 920, 942, 951.
12. Voltaire, in a later letter to Asselin, (Besterman 955), states that he has removed from the tragedy all lines which might suggest that Brutus was guilty of parricide. This alteration of the original text might possibly be construed as an agreement on Voltaire's part with the criticisms of Desfontaines.
13. See Besterman, IV, p. 161. Desfontaines, however, seems to forget this concession on his part when, in the *Observations* for March 10, 1736, he again comments on this tragedy, implying that the so-called errors in the original were the fault of the author and not of the editor. (See Besterman V, p. 88, fn. 5)
14. Cf. Besterman, 906, for a letter to Asselin in which the same idea is expressed.
15. See Besterman, IV, p. 13, fn. 5.
16. Voltaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Ed. Beuchot), Paris, Garnier Frères, 1877, III, p. 381.
17. *Ibid.*, VIII, 421-423.
18. See Nisard, *op. cit.*, p. 81; Besterman, 1101; and Desnoiresterres, *Voltaire, au Château de Cirey* (Paris, Didier), 1868, p. 107.
19. Except indirectly when he writes: "Cependant dès le mois de décembre de cette année 1735, il a commencé à se déchaîner publiquement contre moi, et à signaler sa haine par des invectives grossières et atroces, qui ne déshonorent que leur auteur passionné." (Cited by Desnoiresterres, *op. cit.*, p. 110)
20. Besterman, 1449, and *Oeuvres Complètes*, X, 521-22.
21. Voltaire, however, did not keep secret from his friends the fact that he wrote the pamphlet. See Besterman, 1750.
22. *La Voltairomanie*, published in *Relation de ce qui s'est passé dans une assemblée tenue au bas du Parnasse* (La Haye, Pierre Paupe, 1739).
23. Nisard, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
24. Elie Fréron, *L'Année Littéraire*, 1774, I, p. 17.